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ABSTRACT

Issues in requiring community service for high school graduation are addressed in this document. The debate is not whether community service is valuable, but whether making it mandatory lessens its positive effects. Proponents of mandating student volunteerism argue that it provides a valuable learning experience; gets all students involved; creates school-community links; ensures a wide-ranging service program for each district; and teaches responsibility. Opponents raise the following concerns: cost and adequate resources; liability; evaluation; and the unpopularity of mandates. The elements of a community service action plan, whether voluntary or mandated, are outlined: the orientation program; the action; periodic school supervision; student reflection; and evaluation. Eight stages of community planning are also highlighted. A final consideration is that of the school board member's role. (LMI)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES
Volume 23/Number 7/September 1992
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Mandated Volunteerism: Is it right? Do we want it?

by Christine Morris

To serve or not to serve: That is one of the hot new questions facing school boards. Or, more precisely, the question is whether or not to require mandatory community service for high school graduation.

The idea of community service for adolescents is by no means a new one. In past decades, closer community ties, extended families living in close proximity to one another, and strong church affiliation all combined to offer young people many opportunities for helping their neighbors. However, in the past few decades as America moved from a rural to an urban/suburban society (56.1% of the population lived in metropolitan areas in 1950 versus 77% in 1988) and as the population became more transient, opportunities to serve at the community level have become less connected to the lives of our youth.

Often we hear of the lazy, uncaring, self-centered student who is only interested in material goods and how he or she will manage to acquire the latest thing, be it sneakers, CDs or a leather jacket. But, few of us who have regular contact with adolescents really believe this stereotype. On the contrary, what we sometimes mistake as laziness, on closer examination turns out to be boredom; and what appears to be preoccupation with material goods is really a call for attention. It is not that children have changed so much over the past two decades; it is that our expectations of what we want for them and how we can help them attain their goals have changed.

Christine Morris is a researcher who works with NSBA's Comprehensive School Health Education Project.

Connecting Kids and Communities

Yesterday's, today's and tomorrow's children all need the same thing—a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves. Though the needs of the community have grown and while the desire to make a difference and to feel needed remain strong, the connection between the under-served community and the under-challenged youth has been severed. We simply have not made a place for adolescents in community affairs or in the sphere of adult economic activity. As a result, America's youth is not learning the important lessons that come from these kinds of interactions, i.e. personal responsibility, social and political awareness, and community obligation.

If this is the case, how do we rebuild the link? Former U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest Boyer's position, as stated in his 1983 book, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*, is:

> "Today it is possible for American teenagers to finish high school yet never be asked to participate responsibly in life in or out of the school, never be encouraged to spend time with older people who may be lonely, to help a child who has not learned to read, to clean up the litter on the street, or even to do something meaningful at the school itself." (Page 209)

He concludes that the inclusion of a Carnegie unit of public service, consisting of 120 hours of community service as a requirement for high school graduation, would be a good place to begin.

The Goals of "Service Learning"

In response to this call, many school districts and one state, Maryland, have made community service or "service learning" a required component for high school graduation. The most often stated goals of these programs are: building a tradition of service in the community's children, teaching responsibility; filling the growing need for service among our aging and poor populations; building a sense of community in our young people; teaching students the importance of cooperation and communication; and giving students a feeling of accomplishment and the sense of being winners that comes from helping others.

If all or any of these goals are met by community service programs, it would

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be difficult to call them failures or mistakes. Indeed, all community members, from school board members to teachers to parents, would surely welcome any of these achievements. The debate is not whether community service is a valuable undertaking, but whether making it mandatory somehow lessens the positive effects.

The Questions

Arguments against mandatory requirements from the school administration center around the more technical difficulties. What is the cost of these programs? How can the scheduling of every child in an activity be done cost effectively? How will we ensure the provision of adequate placement? Which types of organizations are acceptable? Do some organizations that might need volunteers expose adolescents to any potential risk and, if so, who assumes the liability for that risk? Will there be adequate adult supervision at the organization site? Along with these logistical concerns are questions about the educational goals of such programs. Simply put, how will we evaluate whether these types of programs are valuable?

Students also have strong reservations about these mandatory programs. In Maryland, where students scheduled for graduation in 1997 will be required to provide 75 hours of community service between 6th and 12th grades, Jonathan Sims, the student representative to the Maryland State Board of Education, fears that students who are forced to do community service may view the work as something to "get out of the way," and that "students will become clock watchers" where "the quality of their work will suffer." He feels that the same goals can be reached by encouraging rather than requiring students to volunteer. Mr. Sims suggests: "Volunteering is so simple to sell, there is no need to mandate it."

One of the suggestions Mr. Sims offers is to emphasize the importance of community service through modeled behavior and through the curriculum. "Encourage students to volunteer in all aspects of school. History lessons can include the contributions of great volunteers like Mother Teresa; English classes can read literature which extols the virtue of community service."

However, Ron Peiffer, Director of Communication and Special Projects at the Maryland State Department of Education, believes that when opponents argue that we cannot mandate volunteerism, they are ignoring the basic goal of the required service programs, i.e., education. Mr. Peiffer says, "The goal of the program is to design an experience which will provide an instructional guide to the student's role as a citizen and enlighten the student as to major social issues and problems...We are not just sending kids out in unstructured programs to bank some hours. The programs have three components in which the student is involved: planning the action, completing the community service and, then, reflecting on the meaning of the experience."

Diane Sanchez, Coordinator of Business Education for the Montgomery County School District echoes this assessment. She states that these programs offer "an opportunity for students to get a broader vision; to view the needs of their community and to begin to see ways in which they can serve." However, she concedes that there are real concerns regarding adequate supervision at the community sites. "We must make sure we don't end up with situations in which there is not a paid adult at each site supervising the student."

Let's Look At the Pros and Cons of Mandating Community Service

Proponents of the community service requirement say that it:

- Provides a valuable learning experience;
- Ensures that all students get involved;
- Can create an important link between schools and their communities;
- Ensures that every district will have a wide ranging service program in place; and
- Provides a "level field" for working and learning in which academic standing is de-emphasized, affording another opportunity where honor students, average students and at-risk-of-failure students work side-by-side on a project.

Additionally, proponents note two long-term values:

- As the civil rights legislation has proven, you can legislate behavioral change in a society. Mandatory community service may be an effective way to begin the reconstruction of our communities.
- As educators, we have a responsibility to teach students the "basics" they need to succeed in—and successfully build—a desirable community. To that end, we mandate the instruction of math, science and English. Mandating community service is a simple extension of that idea.

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While acknowledging that community service is a desirable goal, opponents of mandating volunteerism raise the following concerns:

- Do we have adequate resources to ensure the teacher training necessary to make service learning a successful education program?
- Mandating that service programs be available to, rather than required of, every student for credit may be a more effective method for encouraging present and continued community service in our youth.
- Mandates of any kind are unpopular and invite political dissension and judicial action.
- Scarce resources make it essential that individual school districts be given as much leeway as possible in designing programs that will be most beneficial to their student populations.

Whether or not your district is currently embroiled in a similar controversy regarding mandatory community service, the value of service learning for many of our nation's students is indisputable. Tony Delberti, former Community Service Coordinator for Montgomery County Schools (MD), has spoken on this matter: "The single most important outcome is that kids benefit as human beings...Mandating the requirement gives those students who would never have thought of doing community service the chance to have the most rewarding experience of their lives. I've seen students stay in school because of the rewards of community service, because someone needed them."

For Mr. Peiffer, the benefits of a carefully constructed program are clear. "Beyond the instructional value, students are exposed to values issues, something that society in general feels is lacking in our youth. We put kids in situations where they can assess the world around them and come up with some positive values."

A Plan of Action

If you are considering a community service program, it is crucial that you define the educational goals and construct the processes to maximize those goals. Mr. Delberti emphasizes the need for a well-constructed service program, whether voluntary or mandatory, consisting of:

1) **An Orientation Program** in which students are given the responsibility of choosing and contacting the host agency they wish to serve;
2) **The Action** consisting of the designated hours of service;
3) **Periodic School Supervision** from the school coordinator consisting of monthly or more frequent calls to the host agency to make sure the student is performing his/her duties satisfactorily;
4) **Student Reflection**—whether it be through group discussion, individual meetings or journal records—to give the student an opportunity to evaluate what progress he/she has made as a human being.
5) **Evaluation**—Both the student and the host organization should evaluate the value of the program. The host organization evaluation can then be shared with the student to enhance the learning experience.

Good planning is fundamental to development of effective programs and achievement of desired results. While your school board probably has a program planning procedure in place, there are some indispensable steps that bear repeating.

1. *Determine the priority of volunteer service within the community.* In order to garner the resources that are necessary to develop and maintain programs, the benefits of community service to students must be linked directly to learning and be perceived as aiding in providing them with the opportunity for successful lives. The priority afforded community service will drive the development of the program's philosophy and goals.

2. *Commit the school board and the school administration to supporting the program.* The backing of school leaders is essential in ensuring the actual implementation of, as well as ensuring the continuity of, any program. School board policies are needed that state this commitment, provide clear guidance for the administration of community service programs, and assure that program objectives and goals augment the district's overall education goals.

3. *Assess the needs and wants of the community.* Along with the benefits we gain from the diversity of the unique American society come a variety of attitudes, values, and desires. Each school board will have to determine what its community wants and needs, and what the school community can do. The success of a service learning program will be affected by its relevance to issues of importance in the community and its sensitivity to the opinions and cultural/linguistic backgrounds of its citizens.

4. *Enlist community support and establish a community service advisory committee.* Community advice and involvement is integral to the school district's ability to respond to the demands placed on it. The sharing of ideas and the coordination of resources increase the potential for developing effective programs and, simultaneously, enhance the visibility and viability of those groups represented on the advisory committee, thereby making them more effective. The responsibility of this committee is, as its name suggests, to provide advice from its members and feedback from the community to the school board. Additionally, it serves as the network from which school-community partnerships can be formed. The advisory committee should be representative of parents, teachers, community service agencies, school administrators and staff, students, business and industry, and civic and religious organizations.

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5. *Assign a program coordinator.* Coordinating and integrating all the elements of a community service program should be the function of a central person with good organizational and leadership skills. School boards and administrators need to be sure that the coordinator has sufficient time and knowledge to carry out all the tasks required to develop and implement an effective, comprehensive program. These responsibilities include:

- supervising all aspects of the program, including special activities;
- coordinating development/selection of the community service training with input from the advisory committee;
- providing for inservice training for all staff members;
- coordinating the school program with community agencies' services and activities;
- organizing meetings to share program information with parents and to seek their involvement;
- writing grant proposals for supporting funding;
- developing and maintaining an ongoing evaluation plan; and
- assisting with training components of the program.

6. *Train teachers and school staff members.* Enabling classroom teachers and other staff members to feel comfortable with and enthusiastic about the new program is necessary for its successful implementation. All school staff members should be involved in inservice training that gives them the knowledge and skills to reinforce the reasons for and importance of the community service requirements.

7. *Provide opportunities for service.* The school as community for students and staff is also a consideration. Peer counseling, peer tutoring, and activities that enhance the school's capabilities to provide services for students and their families should be included in the community service opportunities. Serving as a student representative to the local school board might be a service option that your board will want to consider.

8. *Plan for evaluation and accountability.* Determining how effective the district's community service program is will be a factor of the program goals established by the school board early in the planning. What will be measured in terms of knowledge gains and behavior changes will depend on what the school board has identified as the desired, achievable results of the program. School boards will want to assess their service learning programs to see if they are really working and to learn what changes are required. Also, in this time of increased attention to accountability, no program can be sustained without a review of its impact. School boards will need to regularly evaluate whether the program is relevant to students and teachers, how parents and the school community are reacting to the program, and how well it seems to be meeting its objectives. Indicators of program success might include higher morale among students and school staff, reduced absenteeism, and increased cooperative ventures within the school and between the school and the community.

In the Final Analysis

As your board thinks about the issue of community service and whether or not is is right for your school district, there is a last-but-not-least consideration: that of your role.

Perhaps above all else, school board members are role models for the school community. And, as a school board member, you are a wonderful example of community service. Many of you serve your communities in other volunteer activities in addition to your school board service.

Do not hesitate to use your feelings and experiences in these roles as part of the rationale for your eventual decision about whether to require service learning for graduation, to establish a program making service opportunities available, or to informally encourage students to volunteer their time and efforts in community service.

However your school district proceeds, discussions concerning ways in which we can more effectively link our young people and our communities will be time well spent. Whether you require or suggest volunteer service, whether you establish a structured service learning program or encourage students to follow your example, both our children and our communities can benefit. In the end, providing the opportunities that enable today's students to become tomorrow's productive, responsible citizens will guide your decision. ■

Court View

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Recommendations

1. If your past practice has been not to have such prayers at graduation ceremonies, now is a legally inadvisable time to start doing so. If your practice has been to include such prayers, carefully consider eliminating them or replacing prayers with non-religious moments of silence.
2. Include in your review, in consultation with legal counsel, the use of such prayers at other school events. Your consideration should include any relevant precedents in your jurisdiction and application of the *Lee* coercion question to the event in question.
3. Do not overgeneralize the applicability of the *Lee* ruling. Practices such as invocation and benediction prayers at board meetings, student prayer groups under the Equal Access Act, and use of school facilities by outside religious groups depending on whether the facilities are a "public forum" remain largely untouched by *Lee*.
4. Religion-related issues in the school are now and will continue to be thorny. After careful review of the complexities, if it is your inclination, pray...but do so silently and individually. ■